

# Perception and Barriers of Quality Teaching: From the Perspective of University Teachers in Italy, UK and China

## Insegnamento accademico di qualità e barriere che lo ostacolano, dal punto di vista dei docenti, in Italia, Regno Unito e Cina

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### ABSTRACT

Quality higher education teaching is crucial in enabling higher education institutions to produce creative and adaptable graduates, and it should be the center of gravity of higher education; however, quality of teaching is often overlooked and undervalued (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013). Based on the literature, a possible reason for overlooking and undervaluing the quality of teaching is because “quality” is a value-laden concept with little agreement over the description of quality and without reliable way of assessment (Andreson, Powell, & Smith, 1987; Ehlers, 2009; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2007; Moodie, 1986; Vettori, 2012; Williams & Blackstone, 1983). As university teachers are the core practitioners who are responsible for the quality of teaching, it is important to cognize their perception as it represents the central value of quality teaching. Beside to understand their perception, it is also essential to find out the barriers for them to pursue quality teaching because it will trigger other stakeholders in higher education system to reflect on how to support teachers on improving teaching quality. With these two aims, there are two research questions. The first one is what does university teachers define the quality in their teaching; the second one is what are the barriers that university teachers are facing in their way of improving quality teaching. In this study, the researcher interviews 23 university teachers across various disciplines from Italy, UK and China to find the answers.

Un insegnamento universitario di qualità è cruciale per consentire alle istituzioni universitarie di creare laureati flessibili e creativi, e deve quindi essere il centro di gravità dell'insegnamento universitario. Pur tuttavia la qualità dell'insegnamento è spesso sottovalutata e trascurata. (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013). Facendo riferimento a questa letteratura una delle ragioni possibili per cui l'insegnamento gode di così poca attenzione è dato dal fatto che il concetto di qualità è sovraccarico di significati, mentre c'è uno scarso accordo su cosa qualità significhi e non ci siano forme di valutazione affidabili. (Andreson, Powell, & Smith, 1987; Ehlers, 2009; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2007; Moodie, 1986; Vettori, 2012; Williams & Blackstone, 1983). Poiché i docenti universitari sono coloro che operano sul campo e sono responsabili in prima persona della qualità dell'insegnamento, è importante indagare la loro percezione di qualità, visto che rappresenta il valore centrale di un insegnamento di qualità. E dopo aver capito come essi percepiscono la qualità, è pure essenziale indagare quali sono, per i docenti, gli ostacoli che si frappongono al suo raggiungimento, poiché questo spingerà altri portatori di interesse del sistema universitario a riflettere su come sia possibile aiutare i docenti per aumentare la qualità.

Se questi sono i due scopi del nostro lavoro, possiamo identificare due domande di ricerca. La prima è relativa a come i docenti universitari definiscono la qualità del proprio insegnamento e la seconda è quali sono le barriere che i docenti universitari devono affrontare quando decidono di aumentare la qualità. In questo studio il ricercatore intervista 23 docenti universitari di varie discipline in Italia, Regno Unito e Cina per trovare risposte ai due quesiti.

### KEYWORDS

Educational Quality, Higher Education, Professional Development, Quality Perception, Grounded Theory.

Qualità dell'insegnamento, Insegnamento accademico, Sviluppo professionale, Qualità percepita, Grounded Theory.

## 1. Introduction

In high education, quality is one of the five challenging issues that are highlighted not only in Europe, but also on a global level (Kohler, 2006). As quality is a value-laden concept that means different things to different people, a shared value negotiated by different perspectives could be a way to improve quality practice efficiently in higher education (EFQUEL, 2011). In order to build a shared vision, there should be a core idea that represents the system in order to make negotiation possible among different stakeholders. A recent report *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institution* might be a sign that the recognition of core value is teaching and learning in European higher education system, (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013). In this report, it emphasizes the necessity of professional academics and provides policy recommendations to guide teachers being recognized not only by research, but also by teaching. It is a real step of modernizing higher education as it rethinks quality in term of pedagogical value rather than a managerial assurance at universities. In order to facilitate this policy idea into real daily practice level, it is important to understand the key practitioners - teachers' understanding and position in the quality process. The discovery on teachers' perception and barriers of quality teaching will be helpful to figure out practical issues to improve teaching and learning at universities. In this study, it will explore the perception and barriers of quality teaching from university teachers in Italy, UK and China.

## 2. Methodology

From previous research, quality teaching is considered as a complex concept (Alexander & Golja, 2007; Dittmar & McCracken, 2012; Ghislandi, Raffaghelli, & Yang, 2013; Lee Harvey & Williams, 2010; McMahon, Barrett, & O'Neill, 2007), so qualitative research approach is adopted as its suitability of making sense of complexity (Richards & Morse, 2007) from university teachers' perception of quality teaching and barriers they are facing in their way of pursuing quality teaching. Furthermore, grounded theory is chosen as the research methodology for the following two reasons. The first reason is that grounded theory is suitable for this research situation. There are two types of research situation suits the methodology of grounded theory (Richards & Morse, 2007): one situation is to study an almost new topic with few previous research; another situation is to study an old topic with a new perspective. In this study, both perception and barriers of quality teaching are old topics, however, few previous research explore the two issues from the perspective of university teachers in three countries, so this study suits the second type of research situation of choosing grounded theory. The second reason is that grounded theory is suitable for this research purpose. In this study, it aims to present university teachers' own voice rather than to shape their idea into a pre-defined framework while grounded theory is a systematic qualitative method to enable important concepts emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

### 3. Research Implementation

This study was conducted from December of 2012 to December of 2013. There is a summary of information on the participants in this study (Table 1). Interviews are mainly conducted in a face-to-face approach with the supplementary way via telephone and online in the case that the researcher is not able to meet the participants in the presence. The total time of interview recordings is proximately<sup>1</sup> 23 hours with one teacher per hour.

Disciplines	Philosophy (1), Psychology (2), Cognitive Science (1), Computer Science (1), Education (3), Media and Communication (2), English Education (1), Medicine (1), Economics and Management (3), Statistics (2), Structure Engineering (1), Linguistics (1), Geography (1), Agroforestry (1)
Country context	Italy (7), UK (11), China (5)
Teaching experience <sup>1</sup>	0-5 years (5): 3, 4, 4, 4, 5 6-10 years (3): 7, 10, 10 11-20 years (8): 11, 12, 12, 15, 18, 20, 20, 20 21-30 years (4): 23, 23, 27, 28 Above 30 years (2): 35, 45
Teaching context	Traditional university: 18 Open university: 5

Table 1. Summary on Participants Information

### 4. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis is based on the grounded theory method with three phases of coding: initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding is the first phase of coding in which the researcher tries to extract participants' view based on the interview transcripts using in vivo coding, almost all the codes developed in this period come from participants' own word or the researcher summarize participants' idea into a word or a phrase. Focused coding is the second phase of coding in which the researcher tries to organize all the in vivo codes into several groups or categories. Theoretical coding is the third phase also the last phase to unify all the categories around a core concept that represents the central idea of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

To ensure the validity of coding, the researcher invites an external expert<sup>3</sup> to code two samples of transcripts in this study. In Table 2, all the codes are presented with the coders in columns and are assigned into several groups in rows based on the similar meaning<sup>4</sup>. Each coder makes eight codes in the two samples

- 1 In the calculation of recording time, the total is 23 hours and 39 minutes.
- 2 There is one teacher without the information on the years of teaching experience, so the summary on this section is from 22 teachers.
- 3 The external expert is a PhD candidate at Institute of Learning Innovation at University of Leicester in UK.
- 4 In the group 1, there are some phrases directly quoted from the transcripts to provide evidence on explaining the similar meaning of the two coders' codes.

of transcripts, and only one of the eight codes is different with “two types of assessments” from the researcher while “teaching quality in a teacher-centered view” from the external expert. The other codes are similar in the two ways. The first way is codes with similar ideas are described differently such as codes in group 1-3. In group 1, the researcher makes one code “quality is not the first concern” while the external expert extracts the similar idea with two codes “view of quality” and “more important than quality”. Though their codes are written differently, they come from the same sentence in the transcript “It (quality) is not my concern in the beginning because when you start teaching you much concern about your performance” with a similar idea that performance is the first concern when teachers start teaching. In group 2, the researcher makes two codes “Giving competence to students” and “students are unable to use the knowledge” while the external expert has one code “problem in teaching practice: theory vs practice”. The two coders discover the same problems in quality teaching from the interviewees: teachers think quality teaching means giving competence to students, and the competence is students’ capability of applying the knowledge or theory they have learnt into practice. In group 3, the researcher makes one code “meaning of quality depends on the types of learners” while the external expert has two codes “quality teaching for undergraduates” and “quality teaching in advanced classes”. Two coders express the same idea of distinguished quality perception based on the learners by different descriptions. The second way is codes with the same idea are described similarly such as codes in group 4 and group 5. In group 4, the researcher’s code is “negative aspects in group work” while the external expert expresses the same idea with a code “group work in opposition to quality teaching” as the interviewee mentions s/he does not want to use group work in his/her teaching due to the difficulty of assessing the individual contribution. In group 5, two coders select the same keyword “Socratic” with the researcher’s code is “Socratic teaching” and the external expert’s code is “quality teaching, Socratic method”. In summary, the agreement on the codes from two coders is 87.5% (7 similar codes in the total of 8 codes) and it supports the reliability of the researcher’s coding work.

Questions for coding:		
1. What do university teachers define the quality in their teaching?		
2. What problems they are facing in their teaching?		
	The researcher’s codes	The external expert’s codes
Group 1	Quality is not the first concern (“concern about your performance”)	View of quality (“not my concern”) More important than quality (“concern about your performance”)
Group 2	Giving competence to students Students are unable to use the knowledge	Problem in teaching practice: theory vs practice
Group 3	Meaning of quality depends on the types of learners	Quality teaching for undergraduates Quality teaching in advanced classes
Group 4	Negative aspects in group work	Group work in opposition to quality teaching
Group 5	Socratic teaching	Quality teaching, Socratic method
Separate codes	Two types of assessments	Teaching quality in a teacher-centered view

Table 2. Comparison on co-coding results

Although usually there is only one core concept in data analysis based on grounded theory approach, the researcher decides to have two core concepts in this study as the two research questions: one core concept perception of quality teaching and another core concept for barriers of quality teaching.

### 5. Research Finding on Perception of Quality Teaching

From university teachers’ point of view, quality teaching is a complicated issue that composed various aspects such as design, pedagogy, assessment, and expectation on the learning outcomes. To summarize the complex idea of quality teaching, a words cloud (Figure 1) is developed using the codes<sup>5</sup>. Despite teachers’ thought varies a lot depends on their teaching experience, their disciplines and countries, from the transcripts of 23 teachers’ interview, there is a common concern on the perception of quality teaching that is: their expectation on students’ a deep understanding on the learning subject. According to constant comparison method in the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), as the code “*deep understanding*” is frequently appeared from transcripts as a common concern across differences in the disciplines and countries, so the research select it as the core concept for teachers’ perception of quality teaching.



Fig. 1. Codes on Quality Perception

To elaborate the complexity of perception on quality teaching, the researcher selects several sentences to explain important codes and the relations among different codes from the interview transcripts.

*Sentence 1:* I think good teaching means it should be exciting and related to people’s real life experience, and it should be about research what we know now, not what we knew in 20 or 30 years ago.

5 To draw this cloud, weights are set for each code for the importance and the platform for developing the cloud is <http://www.wordle.net/>.

This sentence includes two in vivo codes: “*related to real life experience*” and “*frontier knowledge*” and it presents quality teaching from the aspect of content design. For academic learning at universities, students are expected to become experts in their study fields; so it is important to design the content with cutting-edge knowledge. Besides, it also advises on engaging students by teaching things that related to their real life experience. Most of the learning subjects are relevant to the life such as psychology, economics, statistics and so on. If teachers only introduce abstract knowledge, students might not be motivated to learn according to their personal preference. However, if teachers present the knowledge with real examples relevant to students’ own experience, it is a good way to enhance the *attractiveness of content*<sup>6</sup> for learners and it might also challenge their own ways of thinking in order to develop a new way to understand things with the “professional perspective” they are gaining from the study field.

*Sentence 2:* for a good course, you need to have a useful amount of knowledge and content and that content need to be coherent...then to help students access that knowledge, you need to have time for them to play with that knowledge, understand that knowledge, develop that knowledge to discuss with other people, to think about it, to understand in relation to the knowledge they already have.

Two in vivo codes are extracted from this sentence: “*accessible content*” and “*logical progression*”. It continues the topic of content design from sentence 1 by adding a new point that is: teachers need to consider the accessibility of knowledge in term of students’ previous knowledge background, so students are able to access and understand the knowledge with the help of teachers. According to the idea of “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1987), “*accessible content*” will help learners go to a new knowledge level (zone of proximal development) from their previous knowledge level (a zone that learners can do without guidance) and teachers prepare the knowledge in an accessible way for students could be considered as a form of guidance (scaffolding). Furthermore, this sentence raises another aspect in quality teaching - the teaching and learning process with the code “*logical progression*”. It is common to have many topics in one course<sup>7</sup>, but few teachers realize the importance of presenting the links among those topics in the teaching. A *logical progression* means teachers present the hidden connections among the separated topics in order to help students *build their own structured of knowledge* and design activities for students to think, discuss (with others) and reflect the knowledge for a better understanding. Besides, the logical progression presented by the teacher could be also considered as a good example on how to approach knowledge for students to develop their self-regulated learning in other topics.

6 The italic term or phrase without quotation marks are the in vivo codes come from other interview transcripts. The reason to include both the codes extracted from the quoted sentences and those come from other transcripts in the discussion is because the researcher wants to show the relations among various codes.

7 For example, in Data Structure (a course in computer science), there are several topics such as array, records, hash table union, trees, and graphs, etc.



*Sentence 3:* When you have a group of students together, you can use the knowledge and human resources within the group to generate more knowledge, and you can get students to challenge each other. So it is not just always one way thing between teacher and students that would be a quality for me is that there are tasks or assignments, projects that get students to use each other's knowledge and to learn from each other productively.

This sentence includes two in vivo codes: *“students’ contribution”* and *“get students to challenge each other”*. Students are tended to be the ignored resource in the teaching and learning process when teachers are used to consider them only as the recipients of information. University students are adult learners with more experience in their life compared to learners in K-12 education and sometimes even more professional backgrounds and practical experience (e.g. students in the postgraduate study with working experience in the same field) compared to the teachers. So they might be able to provide more fresh idea in the topics they are studying. Besides, teachers who have international students might also consider the *multi-cultures* as a resource to encourage student contributing to the whole group. Many teachers in their teaching mention *small group tasks*, and some of them also provide further suggestions such as monitor questioning and *keep authority* to make it work.

*Sentence 4:* I think it is really important in quality of teaching it is how we verify them...I think it is the most important because they(students) study functionally for the examination. So if you change what you ask, for the examination, even you don not change all the rest, you would have another outcome.

Though codes are not directly extracted from this sentence, but it presents another aspect on teachers’ perception of quality teaching, that is assessment. In the interviews, teachers mention the assessment is almost the last element for them to think in the design but usually it is the first thing for students to pay attention to. Although teachers are aware of the impact of assessment on students’ learning approach and result, sometimes it is still difficult to find an efficient and effective way to assess the learning. Teachers have the dilemma to choose the test between *“objective”* exams (such as multiple choices questions, Yes/No questions) and *“subjective”* exams (such as open questions, essay, oral exam) due to the time requirement and *fairness in the evaluation*. *“Objective”* exams are usually timesaving, but it is not easy to understand students’ idea on a particular topic in depth. *“Subjective”* exams are usually good ways for presenting students’ idea but with a significant risk of plagiarism and time commitment from teachers such as essay. Teachers also discover a problem on score validity in *“subjective”* exams. For example, in oral exams, it might be difficult to distinguish students’ own thought from teachers’ comments and guidance.

*Sentence 5:* They do not just learn something by memory without understanding, they go much in depth...So the idea that students change the way of their thinking and their relationship to other people and other places in the world and that learning is something lasts with them, so it is not something that they do the course and forget about it.

This sentence includes the in vivo code *“deep understanding”* that presents quality teaching from expected learning outcome. Teachers expect students to

gain a deep understanding on the learning subjects rather than to have a superficial understanding on the knowledge to pass the exams. According to five levels of understanding in the solo taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982), a deep understanding means learners are able to integrate separated knowledge into a structure and generalize the knowledge into a new domain. For example, teachers of C++ programming in computer sciences expect students will have a deep understanding in programming in the sense that they can not only know the specific knowledge such as the grammar and rules in C++ language but also understand the most important idea on programming which is transferable and adaptable to study any programming language. Teachers from psychology expect students to use theories or cognitive process to explain certain situations rather than only write know the definitions. “Deep understanding” is selected as the core concept because it is a common idea across disciplines and countries. Slightly differences on teachers’ idea of deep understanding mainly come from teaching experience. Teachers with less teaching experience define “deep understanding” within the learning subject field while teachers with long experience define “deep understanding” as change learners’ way of thinking for people, things around them, and even towards the world which is beyond the boundary of the subject field.

In summary, university teachers describe their idea of quality teaching includes how they select the content, organize and monitor the teaching learning activities, and verify students’ learning and their expectation on the learning outcome. Though in the whole process, ideas on design, pedagogy or assessment are different according to the features of disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, engineering, humanities) and teaching context (country, undergraduate/postgraduate, face-to-face/distance/blended, individual work/ team work), a common idea is that they all expect students to achieve a deep level of understanding in the subject.

## 6. Research Findings on Barriers of Quality Teaching

From university teachers’ perspective, almost all the teachers express their willingness to have quality teaching in their practice. However, it is not easy to achieve this goal due to the barriers. Here is a words cloud generated from codes to describe the barriers (Figure 2), barriers are summarized into three levels: personal, institutional, and policy level.

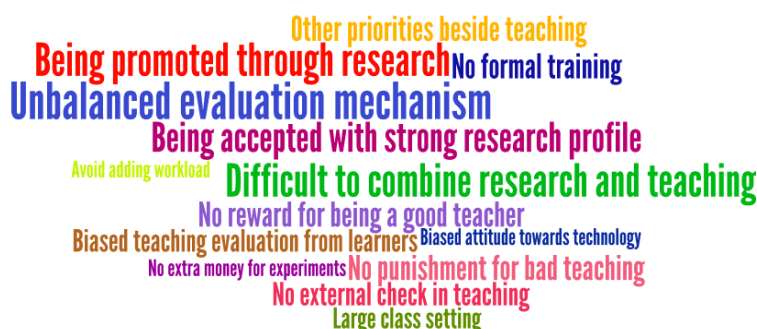


Fig. 2/ Codes on Barriers of Quality Teaching



To elaborate the three levels of barriers, the researcher selects several sentences to explain important codes and the relations among different codes from the interview transcripts.

*Sentence 6:* I think it is very difficult to keep two things going all the time together... in the past, I tried to pack all my teaching between September and December, and this year I asked to change it because research is not something you can stop. I mean if you have students or you have to supervise the project, it keeps going. So it means that in the time of teaching, you really have to divide your attention a lot between two things and it is difficult to keep doing it qualitatively well.

This sentence includes the code *“difficult to combine research and teaching”*, which presents a personal level of barrier: time. University teachers play two roles at universities; one is the teacher and another one is the researcher. In the interviews, teachers complain that it is not easy to find a balance between teaching and research as time is always limited. On one hand, they are required to be continuously active in their research; on the other hand, they also need to spend much time to prepare the teaching as not all the courses are tightly connected to their current researches. Time as a scarce resource become a personal barrier for quality teaching, other codes such as *avoid adding workload, other priorities beside teaching, a large class setting* are all related to this barrier.

*Sentence 7:* I don not believe in online teaching, I don not believe in online teaching in the other class, either.

This sentence includes the code *“biased attitude towards technology”* and it shows another personal barrier in quality teaching - limited pedagogic knowledge. The reason that s/he does not believe in online teaching because s/he tried online teaching with a negative outcome, so s/he thinks online teaching is not good. However, no matter what kind of delivery method, face-to-face teaching or online teaching, both of them have advantages and disadvantages. So whether it works well or not, it depends on how the teachers' knowledge on the delivery in term of taking as much as possible the advantage and avoiding the disadvantage rather the delivery method itself.

*Sentence 8:* Here, there is no course, nobody checking in, no tools. It will be nice if there is at least like a class or web page or something else such as now you need to teach a course, what you do, step 1 do this, step 2 do that, create this, go through that. There is nothing like that. I mean maybe there is, but I don not think, no one told it to me.

This sentence includes the code *“no formal training”* that shows there is an institutional barrier on the support for teaching skills. University teachers are usually *accepted with strong research profile* and in some many teachers start their teaching career without any training, so their practice is mainly based on their personal intuition of teaching they adopt from their teachers when they are students. If institutes don not provide training for teachers to improve their teaching professional, teachers will not spend much time to enhance their teaching skills as time is so limited and they have *other priorities beside teaching*. Besides, another barrier is institutes don not provide enough financial support for teachers to innovate their teaching, so teachers are driven with the funded research

project rather than self-funded teaching experiments. *No extra money for experiments* is a code related to this issue.

*Sentence 9:* It is quite obvious that our national evaluation on university teachers is mainly based on research. If you do good research, you receive a good evaluation. There is not enough weights on teaching, so teachers don't pay much attention to it.

This sentence includes a code “*unbalanced evaluation mechanism*” that presents a shared barrier in the policy level across three countries in this study. Teachers in the interviews mention that the most important criteria for teachers' promotion at universities are research and publications. Teaching is not formally recognized as research activities, and relevant codes from the transcripts are *no reward for being a good teacher, no punishment for bad teaching* and *being promoted through research*.

Though barriers come from various aspects, some from teachers themselves such as limited time and knowledge to improve teaching quality while some from institutes such as lacking intellectual and financial support on quality teaching, the fundamental barrier is from policy level that is unbalanced evaluation mechanism for university teachers. One teacher in the interview makes a comparison on teachers' evaluation and students' assessment. The idea is that if the assessment is not well designed in term of being coherent with the learning content and learning objective, probably students will only try to meet the requirement from assessment, which is insufficient for the targeted learning outcome. The same principle applies to teachers' evaluation. If the evaluation is not well designed in term of balancing both research and teaching, teachers will try their best to meet the bias evaluation requirement and become experts in a particular subject based on their continuous research effort but less development on teaching. So “*unbalanced evaluation mechanism*” is selected as the core concept in the barriers of quality teaching because it is the key to solve other levels' barriers. If teaching is formally recognized in university teachers' professional development as research, on one hand, teachers themselves will definitely pay much more attention to their teaching quality not only for students in their courses but also for their own career promotion; on the other hand, the change on the policy will also have an impact on high education institutions to recommend them provide more support in teaching.

## 8. Discussion

As quality teaching is to make learning possible (Ramsden, 1992), it means the purpose of teaching is to create an environment for learning; further speaking, quality teaching is not a sufficient condition for good learning outcome as students are responsible to their own learning. So quality teaching does not definitely lead to high learning result, as there is no sufficient and necessary condition between teaching and learning. However, most of the teachers in the interview tightly link their understanding of quality teaching to students' learning outcome. The evidence from the literature is that scholars indicate the way of assessments impact students' learning approach (Noel Entwistle, 2000) and indirectly impact students' learning outcome because students' understanding on the learning subject is strongly influenced by their learning approach (NJ Entwistle, 1998;

Marton & Säljö, 1976). For unbalanced evaluation mechanism for university teachers, though few study states it as a barrier for quality teaching in the literature but it is already considered as a challenge in the way of changing the culture of higher education (Bates, 2010).

Besides present evidences from the literature that might support the main research findings in this study, the researcher also would like to raise discussions based on the subordinate findings.

1. Teachers' perception of quality teaching will be different over time or not?  
Most of the teachers in the interviews keep the same idea over time. A few teachers think the idea of quality evolved through their experience and also influenced by their working context and the development of technologies.
2. Teachers' perception of quality teaching will be influenced by the factor of students or not?  
Most of the teachers in the interviews mainly present their perception of quality teaching within their own responsibilities such as how to design the content, organize activities, engage students without considering the factor of students. Just few teachers mention their teaching quality is directly linked to students, and if students are not motivated to learn or not well prepared to learn, the situation of low teaching quality is difficult to change.
3. Teachers' perception of quality teaching will be different based on their teaching experience or not?  
From the interviews, teachers with more than twenty years' teaching experience first think about students' learning outcome for the quality of teaching; teachers with less than twenty years but more than ten years usually first think about the content, organization of activities and assessment; teachers with less than ten years usually first think managerial aspect of quality such as students' evaluation on the course rather than pedagogy.
4. Teachers' perception of quality teaching will be different based on their working context or not?  
Teachers from traditional universities and open universities have a similar opinion that students' understanding and competence are the most important thing for their perception of quality. However, they face different problems for quality teaching according to their working context such as teachers in traditional universities usually work individually in term of design, teaching and assessment, so they do not have enough time to make changes or update their teaching strategies while teachers in open universities usually work in a team with separated responsibilities less workload, but their students seem to be less motivated to students in traditional universities (one teacher from open university mentioned in the interview).
5. The training situation for university teachers will be different among three countries or not?  
The situation in three countries is slightly different. Teacher in Italy don not have training both before and after their careers; teachers in China usually have informal training seminars after they become a faculty member; teachers in UK have formal training course after they start teaching. It is a program called PG certificate in higher education with a series of workshops on theories of pedagogy and reflections on teaching practice. British universities always encourage teachers to get that certificate in the first several years of their careers.

6. The financial support from institutes will be different among three countries or not?

Based on the interviewees' experience, teachers in Italy and China do not get financial support from their institutes to improve teaching while teachers in UK get funds both from their own institutes and external organization such as The Higher Education Academy (HEA) for both research in their teaching and share successful results.

## Conclusion

Quality teaching and learning are the most important aspect in higher education system, which brings benefit to people's well-being and continuous development of our society. This study explores university teachers' perception of quality teaching, which is the first step to understand the main value of quality in higher education system. The findings indicate that quality teaching is a complex issue that covers various aspects. Quality teaching is not only just about good designed content, strategies for students' active participation in the teaching learning process, effective assessment but also mainly aim to help students achieve a deep understanding on the subject, to cultivate competence and skills for their profession. Besides, this study also try to understand the barriers that university teachers are facing for quality teaching and it discovers there are different levels of barriers such as limited time and knowledge from a personal level, lacking intellectual and financial support on pedagogy, and unbalanced evaluation mechanism for university teachers from policy level. The main barrier for teachers' quality teaching is from policy level that university teachers are mainly evaluated by their research and publications. A balanced evaluation mechanism to recognize both teaching and research in teachers' professional development could be an implication for policy makers to consider with the aim to motivate teachers to do improvement on their teaching quality.

There are some limitations in this study. Firstly, data are mainly collected from the interviews or relevant to interviews such as research memo and field notes. Though the researcher has some class "observations" both in the presence and online, but these data are not included in the analysis for findings because of the limited amount. Secondly, the researcher interview some participants in Chinese because they feel much more comfortable to share their idea and experience with their first language. In this paper, some quotations are translated from Chinese to English by the researcher and it will be better if there is an external expert to check the quality of translation.

To summarize, there are two important points in the research finding: one is a deep understanding on the learning subject as teachers' perception of quality teaching; another one is unbalanced evaluation mechanism as a main barrier of quality teaching. For the next step work, the researcher would like to explore how to help teachers to design activities for students' a deep understanding on the subject.

## Note

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